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ABSTRACT

Institutions offering distance education courses realize the value that well-trained and well-prepared faculty contribute to the success of their distance education programs. However, taking approximately a half-hour in the first session of any course to prepare the students for their distance education experience will add to the success of the course. Such student preparation establishes reasonable student expectations, the theme of a learning community, the parameters of learner responsibility, and the "rules" of the classroom. Having someone other that the designated class instructor deliver this orientation allows the instructor to develop rapport with students since all are hearing this orientation together. It also allows the instructor to reinforce what was covered in the orientation as students begin assuming their responsibilities. This paper discusses the student orientation presentation currently being used at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire that aims to increase students' comfort level with the equipment, raise students' awareness of their responsibilities as learners, and involve students actively as they test the equipment and begin to assume their responsibilities as learners. Comments from students and future issues for student orientation sessions are also discussed. (Author/DLS)

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Student Orientation in the Distance Education Classroom

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Abstract

Institutions offering distance education courses realize the value that well-trained and well-prepared faculty contribute to the success of their distance education programs. However, taking approximately a half-hour in the first session of any course to prepare the students for their distance education experience will also add to the success of the course. Such student preparation establishes

- reasonable student expectations,
- the theme of a learning community,
- the parameters of learner responsibility, and
- the "rules" of the classroom.

Having someone other than the designated class instructor deliver this orientation allows the instructor to develop rapport with the students since all are hearing this information together. It also allows the instructor to reinforce what was covered in the orientation as students begin assuming their responsibilities.

During this presentation the participants will brainstorm the various roles of responsible students in the distance education classroom, discuss the advantages of a student orientation program, and view the student orientation presentation currently in use at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Introduction

Well-trained and well-prepared faculty contribute to the success of any distance education program. As one faculty member new to distance education teaching put it, "To train or not to train is not even a question. . . . It will make all the difference when that first class period arrives." (Dobie, 1998) Much has been written and presented on what faculty need to know to accomplish a successful DE teaching experience; in fact, the more time that is spent up-front, working with faculty the greater the degree of comfort and confidence they show, and that confidence, in turn, leads to success in the classroom (Bergmann and Raleigh, 1996).

Distance education students, on the other hand, are often expected to show up and adapt. They may not even know the class for which they registered is offered via distance education and, even if they know, they may be totally unfamiliar with a distance education classroom environment. A room filled with cameras, monitors, and microphones becomes immediately intimidating. In addition, for students at the remote sites, the instructor is not

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even three-dimensional, in fact, depending on the size of the receive monitor, he or she may appear as far away as a 6:00 p.m. newscaster. Even if the students are at the origination site with the instructor present, they become instantly aware that his/her attentions will be divided between them and students at other locations. It is common for students who are new to distance education to express lower expectations and to assume a decreased quality of learning merely because the class is a distance education offering. These perceptions, however, when tested, often prove erroneous (Seamons, 1987; Beare, 1989; Russell, 1989; Jurasek, 1993; United States Distance Learning Association, 1998).

Preparing Students for Their Distance Education Experience

In the same way that faculty must be prepared for their new role in distance education, so must students be prepared for their role in a distance education class. For the last two years, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire has used a student-focused classroom orientation session for the distance education courses. This session, conducted during the first class meeting by a member of the same team that provides faculty training, has proven advantageous for several reasons:

- Bringing in an "expert" emphasizes the importance of student orientation.
- A presentation by someone other than the instructor allows "breathing space" for the first-time instructor. It provides a model for both instructor and students to follow.
- If any technical difficulties arise during this first class session, the support person has the opportunity to model appropriate crisis behavior.
- Having a third party present the student orientation session allows the instructor and students to form a learning group; the faculty member is well-positioned to provide positive feedback when students exhibit appropriate behaviors suggested in the orientation and gentle reminders when students need to recall distance education etiquette.

In the half hour student orientation presentation, the team strives to meet three specific outcomes:

1. To increase students' comfort level with the equipment.
2. To raise students' awareness of their responsibilities as learners.
3. To involve students actively in the class as they test the equipment and begin to assume their responsibilities as learners.

For students to become comfortable with the equipment they need to know what it is and how it works. They need to be able to hear common distance education jargon and use terms such as "remote site," "panning and zooming," and "document camera." They also need to know how to interact with the equipment. They must know how the microphone works (sound-activated or push-to-speak), how loud they must speak to be heard, when they should begin talking, and the impact of their extraneous conversations. Many students are shocked when they see themselves on camera for the first time and shy away from such experiences. Having them recognize that the on-camera experience is simply a "given" for a distance education class and reassuring them that they will get used to seeing themselves as the semester progresses is essential.

As the presenter introduces the concept of learner responsibility, a metaphor to a five-piece puzzle emerges. Each puzzle piece represents a learner quality; taken together, they complete the picture of a successful distance learner. Qualities include patience, persistence, punctuality, presence, and participation. A PowerPoint presentation provides definitions and examples of each.

Dr. Tom Kubala states, "The problem commonly associated with traditional distance education is the lack of opportunity for collaborative work, debate, dialogue, and conversational learning" (p. 72). The student orientation session dispels the idea that this class will be non-interactive. Discussion during the PowerPoint presentation begins to involve students in the class. To continue this involvement, the students are asked to come to the teaching station and introduce themselves. This can be handled in a variety of ways but often includes some of the students using the teaching equipment. The number of students who speak and the time allotted will vary from class to class. Some introduction strategies include the following:

- Having the students "sign-in" and then take a minute or two to provide some personal data. This involves switching between the document camera and the teacher camera.

- Having students pull something from their wallet or purse that they use in describing themselves. Again, this makes use of the document camera and instructor camera. They also get to practice zoom and focus.

- Having students work in pairs to learn about each other and then introduce each other to the larger group. Students practice zooming, panning, and focusing the teacher camera or use the student camera to focus on their partners as they give the introduction.

- Having each student receive and reply to a question about himself/herself asked by a student at another site. This initiates inter-site conversation.

Actively involving the students early in the first class session increases their comfort level, convinces them that they can be seen and heard, makes them more aware of appropriate speaking levels and speaking times as well as inappropriate speech (whispering, etc.) It serves to gain understanding and empathy with the instructor and establishes classroom inter-activity from the beginning. Students can begin connecting with one another and form the basis of a learning community by revealing common interests.

Any student beginning any class wants information on class procedures, especially how to contact the instructor and how absences will be handled. In the distance education classroom, these items take on an added dimension. While the orientation team can provide a general reduction in anxiety, the instructor, by addressing these class specific issues, increases the overall comfort level for the students. The instructor needs to provide more than an office location. An email address, a phone number (especially if an 800-number is available), and a fax number will indicate to the students that they have options when needing to reach their instructor. Designated on-line office hours or phone-in office hours plus a guaranteed response time for electronic mail help provide necessary accessibility.

Students experiencing the distance education environment for the first time may be leery about missing class for technical or weather-related reasons. What if there is a glitch? What if a blizzard affects one site but not the originating site? Establishing a video taping policy for emergencies and explaining the policy during the first class eases these concerns.

The orientation team can set a mood of inter-activity which the instructor can capitalize on by expressly engaging the students in an activity during this first class session. This demonstrates that the active student involvement, begun in the introductions, will continue throughout the class. During this first session, the instructor can also provide feedback to the students as they participate. For example, a gentle reminder to state name and site when commenting will soon establish the habit for all the students. An enthusiastic response to a student comment may encourage other comments.

Comments From Students

One class of twenty-one students who received the distance education orientation adapted easily to the technology and their enhanced student role. At the end of the class, there was only one student who was still saying, "I hate seeing myself on TV." For the others, this had become second nature, and its value was reinforced by a student saying, "I really appreciated having the camera focused and zoomed on the student who was speaking; we could see facial expressions and everything." The students in this same class developed a conversational relationship between the sites. They would ask each other questions, provide follow-up comments, and share anecdotes all without instructor intervention. One student remarked, "I thought we would feel isolated from the students at [the remote site] but that wasn't the case; we were one class, not two."

Following the orientation appropriate student behaviors were reinforced early and often. If one site could not hear properly, students spoke up immediately so adjustments could be made. Class continued promptly after the breaks. Students used first names from site-to-site by the third week of class.

Another interesting result of the first class orientation is the attitude of students who find themselves in a second distance class in a future semester. Those students are often ready to volunteer what they learned the first time around; they can usually recount at least four of the five "P's." In fact, one early-arriving student came to the aid of the orientation leader as the leader discovered her disk was defective. The student announced, "I think I can help," and reached into her book bag to pull out a handout of the presentation from the previous semester.

Future Issues for Student Orientation Sessions

As students enroll in a second distance education class they may be willing assistants in the presentation; however, as they take a third or fourth class, they will likely get tired of spending class time this way. How, then, do the students new to distance education receive the orientation they need without boring the continuing students?

Another issue related to student orientation is the instructors' willingness to devote class time to this activity. While this is already an issue in some cases, most first-time instructors are willing, often eager, for the first-night support. Instructors who have taught in this

format before may have forgotten how nerve-wracking the first session can be; they may overlook the fact that this is still "a first" for the students.

Conclusion

With proper preparation students will recognize a distance education class as an exciting learning experience in a positive learning environment. Establishing a comfort level for students as well as defining learner responsibilities and expectations helps learners prepare themselves for participation in a new learning community.

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Autobiographical Sketches

Marilyn Bergmann is a lecturer in the English Department at UWEC. Since 1992, she has been teaching the Introduction to College Writing: English 110 course to high school students via ITFS (a one-way audio, two-way video distance education system). She is currently involved in developing and conducting the distance education training program at UWEC and in facilitating a distance education interest group on campus. She has presented introductions

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Donna Raleigh coordinates the Technical Training and Instructional Design unit in the Media Development Center at UWEC. She has been offering technology-based professional development workshops for faculty since 1985 including Internet as well as computer application seminars. She is currently offering the Educational Media On-Line Resources course via distance education for the Foundations of Education Department. Donna and Marilyn collaborate in developing and conducting the distance education training program at UWEC and in planning the DE special interest group on campus. They often provide the student orientation for other UWEC faculty who teach distance education courses. Donna has presented at local, regional, state, and national conferences, and has presented workshops for UW-Barron County and UW-Extension in Madison. She has also authored several articles on various faculty support topics including distance education.

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